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ABSTRACT

A Request for Proposal (RFP) is the formal document used by an agency to solicit services from the outside sources that education agencies often use for the design, administration, or scoring of assessment measures. The guidelines presented are intended to help in writing an RFP. A few fundamental aspects of assessment significantly influence the planning of the RFP process and document: money; time; nature of the project; type of bid; and phases of the project. Because the RFP is part of the eventual contract it should be as clear and precise as possible. Constraints typically hindering the development of "good" RFPs include limitations imposed by agency policies and procedures; limited communication between the agency and bidders; and concern for cost, sometimes at the expense of quality. To deal with these constraints, the RFP writer should specify as carefully as possible what is desired and expected; encourage fair and timely communication with the bidders; and build control of technical quality into the RFP and the project. (SLD)

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Writing RFPs for Assessment Programs

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Federal, state, and local education agencies use many types of measurement tools for a wide array of assessment purposes. Often these agencies do not have sufficient resources in-house to design a data collection plan or to develop, administer, score, and report on needed measures, so they turn to outside sources (such as universities, research centers, test publishers, and other companies) for some of these services.

A Request for Proposals (RFP) is the formal document issued by an agency to solicit such services. It describes in detail the nature of the particular assessment services and materials desired. Interested applicants are invited to submit proposals in accordance with a specified format to be delivered to the funding agency by a specific deadline. Contracts are usually awarded on the basis of both the technical merit of the proposal and the bidders' estimates of the cost for doing the work. Occasionally there is only one company (sole source) that can do the work, but more often responding to RFPs is a competitive process.

This Digest provides an overview on writing your own RFPs. More detailed information can be found in Aschbacher and Baker (1989).

Why should RFPs be carefully written?

The RFP document is part of the eventual contract. Hence, for the sake of both parties, it should be as clear and precise as possible to avoid problems of interpretation. If a task is not mentioned in the RFP or pre-contract negotiations, it is not a part of the contract, and the agency may not be able to compel the contractor to do it.

The companies that provide tests and testing services benefit from receiving clear, concise RFPs that spell out exactly what is needed, the desired level of effort, and how proposals will be evaluated. A complete, precise RFP reduces the risk to a company of losing staff time and money writing a proposal that is not accepted.

The education agency soliciting assessment services, in turn, benefits from receiving a reasonable number of "on target" responses to its RFPs. The more good proposals, the more likely the agency will be able to obtain the services it requires at a price it can afford. If an RFP is unclear, some good companies may decide not to bid, and the agency may lose opportunities for competitive bidding and good ideas.

What are some basic issues to consider before writing an RFP?

There are a few fundamental aspects of assessment projects that significantly influence the planning of the RFP process and document.

1. Money. How much money is available? Is there enough to fund the entire project or only a portion of it? Can you use a combination of fixed and variable funding to avoid having to rewrite the contract if the final cost is more than expected?

2. Time. How much time is available for the project? How flexible is the schedule? Can you work with the legislature (or whoever sets the timeline) ahead of time to ensure a reasonable mandate and to preserve the balance of schedule, cost and quality? When little time is available, flexibility may be gained from judicious wording of RFPs and full use of opportunities to communicate with potential bidders prior to the issuance of the RFP. How much time is budgeted for bidders to respond to the RFP? Complex projects may benefit from more generous response times for bidders.

3. Nature of the project. Is the project an extension or replication of an existing program or is it a new, innovative program? Does the technology for solving the problem exist or does it need to be invented? How committed is the agency to a specific solution? How free is the bidder to be creative? (i.e., do the criteria for evaluating proposals support creativity?) On the other hand, be aware that requiring a creative approach means eliminating proposals that are good but not "creative."

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4. Type of bid. Should the bid be sole source or competitive? Are there several companies that might be able to do the work or really only one? The RFP needs to be pitched accordingly.

5. Phases. Should there be more than one phase of the project (and hence the RFP) to accomplish the goals? For example, large, complex or innovative projects may be best served by a multiple phase proposal process. Each phase may differ in the resources available, degree of innovation desired, and suitability for competitive bidding. In addition, some projects may be most effectively and economically accomplished by having separate contractors provide different services, although this arrangement calls for careful monitoring and coordination.

What are typical constraints in writing RFPs and what can be done about them?

There are several legitimate constraints that typically hinder the development of "good" RFPs:

- limitations imposed by local, state, or federal policies and procedures (e.g. the amount of time needed to authorize, develop, review, and accept an RFP may necessitate the use of vague wording because the RFP must be written before all the facts are known or decided)
- limited communication between agency and bidders (e.g. due to an agency's attempt to preserve fairness)
- concern for cost, sometimes at the expense of technical quality (e.g., the agency may accept or be required by law to accept the lowest bid, even when other proposals offer more desirable, higher quality work).

There are several strategies for dealing with these constraints.

1. Specify in the RFP as carefully as possible what is desired and expected. Where the bidder is expected to offer creative solutions, outline in the RFP any givens, decisions, legislation, or other constraints within which the solutions must work. In the early stages of a developmental project, however, it may be difficult to be precise about what is desired. In this case, a planning meeting with consultants prior to writing the RFP to help clarify and weigh options may be helpful. Alternatively, a planning or design RFP might be used as the first step in the project, to help decide how to proceed with the actual test development or other services.

2. Encourage fair and timely communication between the agency and bidders or potential bidders. For example, introductory letters sent a month in advance to announce an upcoming RFP effectively lengthen the response and planning time for bidders and provide a crucial period when companies can ask clarifying questions, which is particularly helpful in situations where communications are virtually cut off once an RFP is issued. In addition, a bidders' conference can provide useful information to bidders, especially where the RFP was not specific or where the project is expensive, complex or very innovative.

3. Build control of technical quality into the RFP and the project through specifications in the scope of work section and the criteria for evaluating proposals so that even the low bidders must provide the requisite quality to be considered. It is often desirable for several reasons to allow bidders to propose their own technical methods, but it is helpful to require that they completely specify in their proposal the approach and rationale for all major elements of their design. The information will make it easier to compare approaches when reviewing proposals and to negotiate changes in proposed approaches with the bidder who is finally selected. Technical experts may be used as consultants to screen proposals, particularly if complex statistical and technical methods are proposed. In addition, specifying in the RFP that the contractor will provide full technical reports during the project can facilitate later monitoring of the project.

Additional Reading

Aschbacher, P. E. and Baker, E. L. (eds.) *Improving Large-Scale Assessment.* Los Angeles: Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing, UCLA Graduate School of Education, 1989.

Baker, E. L. and Aschbacher, P. E. *Report of State Level Activities: Guidelines for the RFP Process and Selected Technical Issues in Large-Scale Assessment Programs.* Paper given at the annual ECS/CDE Assessment and Policy Conference, Boulder, CO, June, 1987. ED293880

Center for Education Statistics (OERI/ED) *Standards and Policies:* Center for Education Statistics., Washington, D.C., 1987. ED285910

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